

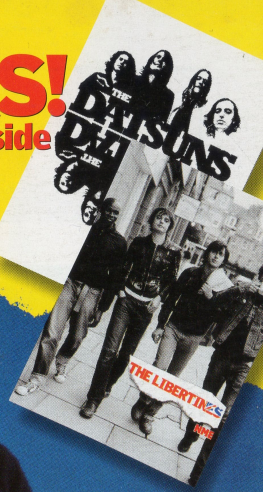
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THE VINES

Oz goes mad for its homecoming heroes!

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"IF ANYONE ELSE ASKS ME IF I'M SUICIDAL I THINK I'LL KILL MYSELF"

Last time they were in Sydney, The Vines played to 200 people. Seven months later, they're back as bona fide stars. But how is being Australia's most-wanted affecting the band and, in particular, Craig Nicholls? NME braves food fights, freak outs and flying chairs to find out

The wizard has returned to Oz. Want to see some of the wonderful things he does?

"Doesn't anyone get bored of eating McDonald's all the time?" asks Craig Nicholls, 25, in the unique and peculiar Sydney-meets-Sydenham accent that The Vines' mercurial maestro has cultivated. It may've taken him two decades of Happy Meals to reach this conclusion, but now, with five Filet-O-Fish and a new edition tiramisu sitting on his lap, epiphany has struck. As the minibus ferrying him and the rest of The Vines across Brisbane from soundcheck to hotel pulls away from the Golden Arches' drive-thru, Craig makes a bold play to kick his fast food habit. He opens the first box, rips the Filet in half and unwinds the window.

"It's all bullshit!" he screams out of the window, flinging the fish at a passing car and scoring a direct hit. He immediately issues an apology when the alarmed target flashes him an angry glare, but he's unrepentant. His drive-by food fight has only just begun.

"Tables!" he screams for no apparent reason, then thrills! Another Filet flies out of the back of the car, arcs through the clear Brisbane afternoon and lands against the windscreen of the minibus. Fishy debris is smeared across the horizon as the wipers attempt to clear the driver's view.

"Are you dead or alive?" he calls out to a pedestrian who just ducks out of the way of some flying fish. Two citizens are gunned down as they await the changing of traffic lights, a bus shelter is showered in tiramisu then, just as quickly as it arrived, the food storm passes, this stretch of an otherwise pristine city now covered in tartare sauce. As The Vines flee the scene of the crime howling with laughter, the perpetrator of the attack is however strangely melancholic.

Craig looks glumly down at his messy, gooey paws. "I wish I'd tried the tiramisu," he says softly.

For Craig, though, the next McDonald's is only ever a meal away. Sydney, beware. The Vines are coming home tomorrow.

September 27, Fox Studios, Sydney, 6.00pm

It's been seven hectic months since The Vines last played Sydney, longer since they toured the old country. Their previous hometown show was to 200 people at The Vic On The Park pub, a gig that generated a profit of around 40 Aussie dollars.

Since then, they have hit paydirt. They've pulled in Top Ten placings with their debut 'Highly Evolved' album in Britain and the US, and gone gold in Australia without even playing there. But how will Sydney react to these homegrown heroes

they barely know? And what will the no-nonsense Aussie music fan make of a performer as flamboyant as Craig Nicholls? Now's the time to find out.

The Vines flew in from Brisbane this morning and are imminently due to play a live set for a TV show called *What U Want* in an open-air shopping arcade belonging to Fox TV. "But first we'll be putting your questions to Craig and the boys," announces one of the two wildly excitable and enthusiastic presenters. "Coming up next!"

The thousand-strong throng of teenagers, some of whom have been here for ten hours to claim their spot near the front, go ballistic, mooning and throwing hand signals for the swooping cameras. And, cut! Backstage, Craig runs a hand through his hair to achieve the requisite spikiness as his best friend and the band's acoustic guitarist Ryan Griffiths rubs his back. The shop next door is called Sanity, but Craig is not a regular customer there.

"He's been running around whacking things with a stick and screaming all day," sighs Andy Kelly, one of The Vines' three good-natured managers. Of the three it is Kelly who tours with the band. He's seen every shade of Craig's fluctuating temperament during their swift ascent to stardom. Days that involve flying are always particularly fraught for plane-phobic Craig. There's been a lot of flying.

"We got a doctor to see him about it in London," says Kelly. "He spent ten minutes talking to Craig, gave him a load of pills. As he left he pulled me aside and said (*assumes posh accent*), 'You know of course he's quite mad!'"

The doctor's prognosis was a little melodramatic, but as we learn over the course of our four days down under with The Vines, Craig Nicholls' mental balance is on a delicate hair-trigger. He throws tantrums that are as funny as they are unexpected and unnerving. He is also by turn sweet, shy and charming (in fact, he's even charming when he's freaking out). Sometimes the calm descends upon him so quickly that the storm that precedes it is instantly forgotten.

But this is all because more than any artist NME has come across, Craig Nicholls is a perfect reflection of his music, and vice versa. Just as the brilliant songs he writes veer from explosive, lunatic rage to soft, stoned introspection, so it is with their author. He spent the journey from Brisbane to Sydney screaming and shouting and acting like a loon, but that's only what he was applauded for onstage last night in Brisbane. When he flew through the drumkit, smashed his head on the monitor and rolled against the amps he wasn't acting up for the audience. That's what he's really like and he's lucky he can communicate his emotions through

song and performance so eloquently, because he'd be in trouble otherwise.

Not that Brisbane fully appreciated it. The two gigs there were sold-out, but just as many came to bury The Vines as did praise them because giggling dues have not been locally paid. There's a suspicion they've cheated by achieving global success without using the domestic gig treadmill first. Older, regular gig-goers here refuse to feel duped into liking the band by poncey Pommie music critics. It's made things a tad frosty so far.

"In Melbourne the audience there was downright hostile," recalls Kelly. "Like, 'Come on you bastards, show us what you got'." No such snobbish hang-ups from the teens in Sydney, thankfully. Craig's entrance onstage is to the high-pitched tune of idolatry hysteria and it takes a moment before the show's presenters can continue with the link. There are lots of young girls screaming.

Eventually the first viewer question is delivered to Craig. "Hi Craig," says Jez from suburban Sydney. "What do your parents think of you touring all the time, are they worried about you?" "They're cool. They just want me to sometimes eat vegetables." "And what are you eating," asks the presenter.

"Mickey D's (*huge cheers*). KFC (*more cheers*). I guess that just

about covers it."

"Good, good, mate. Just wondering what you think of the new Nirvana track."

"Aw, it's majestic."

"OK, another question.

One young man in the audience wants to know if he can be kicked in the nuts by you, Craig."

"Aaahh," ponders Craig seriously, as the rest of the band joins him crouching around the lip of the stage, bassist Patrick Matthews performing an unpaid advert for cigarettes and lager next to him. "I can't do that right now because I'm doing an interview, but maybe I'll come down and kick him in the nuts during the show if that's convenient."

Alas, Craig forgets this promise during The Vines' 40-minute set, but that's the only disappointment of a performance notable for three television firsts. A new song, a huge glowering beast that sounds like Nirvana covering Radiohead's 'The Tourist' called 'Evil Town' makes its broadcast debut. The band play the entirety of 'Fuck The World' (a song whose lyrics consist of little other than those three words) several hours before the TV watershed. And Craig banishes the day's demons by destroying not only Hamish Rosser's drum kit, as is customary, but also his

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Sitting pretty: The Vines (l-r)
Ryan, Patrick, Craig and Hamish

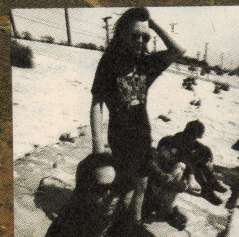


"If I wasn't doing this I'd be able to have a girlfriend but I'd be put in a mental institute if I wasn't doing music. I don't want to meet a girlfriend in there" **Craig**

WHO THE HELL ARE SWERVEDRIVER?

All you need to know about the band on Craig's T-shirt

If *Easy Rider*'s Billy and Captain America were guitar pedal-fixated Thames Valley kids, they would've formed a band exactly like Swervedriver. Second and best album 'Mezcal Head' (from 1993) saw the four-piece scrape cult cool in this country, but they were always a band out of step with the times. That they wrote songs called things like 'Pile Up' and sounded like they were driving very fast through the desert in a big car with fins was never going to make them very successful in



their homeland, especially during the Britpop wars. Kids in Australia were obviously taking notes, though.



Craig signs a skateboard. Oh well, at least it's not another pair of tits

Craig gives his take on R Kelly's 'I Believe I Can Fly'

Another fan gets a unique souvenir... a drumstick in the eye

Whoever left these chairs here clearly wasn't anticipating a visit from a hyperactive Nicholls and an NME snapper

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

guitar and most of the amps. "Er, never seen anything like that before on *What U Want*," says one stunned presenter as he steps gingerly through the debris-strewn stage.

Out by the studio's exit, Crazy Craig has been replaced by Sweet Craig and he spends a while accommodating the hordes of young girls besieging the back door looking for mementoes.

"Sign my tits, please," demands one girl, pulling down her top and revealing three other signatures on her bosom. Craig leans forward and completes the set. Then waving, smiling and bowing, he steps back from the throng and into a minibus. He's got the new Suede album and a bag of grass waiting for him back at his hotel, and he's going to pick up a McDonald's along the way. It's the perfect end to another mad day.

September 28, Bondi Beach, 3.00pm

Craig Nicholls is not a beach bum. He, along with Patrick and Ryan, may come from a southern suburb of Sydney that's famed for producing surfers, but he doesn't like sand.

"I fucking hate sand," he confirms, trudging through the G-strings and he-men to have his photo taken on Bondi's famous white shore dressed in cords and a Swervedriver T-shirt. "I really don't want to get any sand on me."

Within minutes, however, he's clutching two handfuls of sand and is flying through the air in an attempt to stuff it down Hamish's shirt. Hamish, however, is not only unafraid of sand, he's also an Australian man tough enough to sport a handlebar moustache and embroidered denim shirt and trousers. Craig bounces off his drummer and lands in the sand. Now he is sandy.

The events of the next hour or so can perhaps be traced back to this instant.

Soon he's kneeling in the sand and pouring it down his front, a demented smile on his face. A group of teenage girls wearing little more than bikinis and dental braces gather 20 yards away. "Patrick, Patrick," coos one through a mouthful of metal, extending her arm in the air. "Patrick, we came to see you last night. Look, you signed my arm. We've just made sandcastles for you."

"Uh-oh," howls Craig, flinging sand over his shoulder. Hamish

doesn't flinch.

"Ah yeah?" says Patrick. "Did you enjoy the show?" "Yeah, it was great," replies the teenager. "I mean, I think I preferred the Foo Fighters the week before, but it was still good."

Suddenly another female posse attacks from the opposite flank. This group is considerably older. It's a hen party. The hen, a

"sorry."

"May I borrow your goblet for our photos, please?" says Craig leaning forward on his hands and knees and snatching the goblet from the startled hen.

"Er, yeah," she says. "Are you guys famous?"

"Oh dear, we have a problem," says Craig, clutching the goblet to his chest and turning away.

"I shut bad things out. If I see things on TV about a war, I don't want to see that. I just want to listen to the new Suede album" Craig

diminutive 30-something dressed in a pom-pom skirt and clutching an empty goblet, approaches The Vines. She has a question.

"Guys, I've been set a number tasks by my hen party and one of them is getting an answer to questions from different men. Can you help me?"

"Sure," says Hamish, helpfully. "Guys, do you know what a furry oyster is?"

"No," lies Hamish, blushing,

"I'm not used to people talking to me directly."

Presently the photos on the beach are completed and it's suggested to Craig that while NME sets up a new location he might like to grab a bite to eat.

"McDonald's?" suggests his tour manager.

"No, I don't like McDonald's any more."

The Earth stops spinning on its axis for a second. His tour

manager raises an eyebrow. "Fish and chips?"

Craig nods and then runs at full pelt up the beach, throwing himself onto his shoulder after a hundred yards or so. Getting up, he shouts something at a group of jocks playing volleyball before scampering up the steps and into the café. The astonished jocks stop and watch him disappear.

Having pushed his lunch around a plate for half an hour, Craig

and stomps on them, balancing one half back on his nose. "Ah, and these were my favourite sunglasses in the whole world ever, too. Now you've broken them."

Clutching one metal chair leg he clambers up the wall of the amphitheatre and balances on the metal rail, swaying violently back and forth. It's a ten-foot drop onto concrete if he falls backwards but luckily he pitches forward and starts to clamber over the seats. Suddenly, he halts. There is a drum workshop in the next building. He immediately picks up the rhythm and, after tearing off his shirt and tying it across his chest, starts rapping out the same tattoo on the seats and stage shutters with his metal chair leg. Bang bang bang-bang, bang bang ba-bang...

Then he starts singing the rhythm too, so loudly and insanely in fact that some of the drum workshop stop playing and step outside to see what all the noise is about. Once they start playing again, Craig gives up on it. "Uh," he shrugs, "bang bang bang-bang, bang bang ba-bang?"

Instead, he starts ripping the seats up and aiming them at

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THE VINES

Craig's attempts at re-enacting *The Dukes Of Hazzard* go slightly awry

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Patrick's head. He's flinging them right, left and centre, but when one flies towards Ryan's girlfriend he immediately apologises. Patrick is not afforded any such favouritism, though, and they continue to rain down in his, and sometimes Hamish and NME's, direction.

Eventually an old guy in shorts and park warden hat wanders in and asks him "to calm down, sonny, calm down". Craig ignores him, but when he's gone minutes later Craig suddenly does calm down and peacefully completes the photo session.

When things wrap up he bids us cheerio, saying he looks forward to seeing us at the show that night at The Metro, the first of two sell-outs at the 1,200-capacity venue. All the band leave with him except for Patrick who says he wants to watch an Aussie football match in a nearby hotel.

"That was annoying," sighs Patrick when Craig's left, "because he was actually aiming things at me. When he kicks over the drums at Hamish it always looks bad, but he never aims for him.

When I used to be just Craig's friend, whenever he got too loopy I could always leave. Now we're on the road together I can't. I mean, I have hit him in the past but it never really worked out. We've been together all year so now I don't get so worked up if I think he's being ridiculous or insufferable. Half the time, like this afternoon, he's just working himself up for the show."

That the four members of The Vines wound up together is one of nature's

miracles. If any members of the band were different, they wouldn't exist. They are perfect foils for each other (as evidenced by the fact that first drummer Dave Olliffe freaked out around Craig and left the band midway through recording the album). Somehow they mesh together perfectly.

Craig is the mad genius. Ryan is the laid-back party boy (when offered an aspirin for a headache by one of the roadcrew he asks what kind of buzz he'll get from it) who's known Craig longest and draws the sting from him. Hamish is the gregarious all-Aussie male with fantastic facial hair who, unlike any other band member, eats fruit, exercises and is rarely without female company. And Patrick is the nice guy with a powerful intellect, the one who spent six years studying to be a doctor and gave it up to play bass with his nutty friend from down his road.

"The reason Craig has ended up the way he is has to do with an artistic temperament," he explains. "That's not an excuse, that's fact. He's quite smart. Have you heard of fluid intelligence versus static intelligence? Fluid is when you make links and

connections, like surrealism and jokes. Static is about placing facts and figures. Craig is very fluid, not so into facts. I'm static.

"In terms of social demographics we're the exact same thing. Come from the same area, both middle class, dads are professionals. But we're opposites. I'm a citizen. Craig is fuck the world. I'm like, dude, help the aged. Feed the poor. It shouldn't work between any of us, but it does. It is a miracle."

September 30, Surry Hills, 7.00pm

The previous night's show at The Metro is an evening of such joy and wonder that even teetotal Craig goes out on the lash until 6am. There are only two new songs in the set (although one, a magnificent torch-burner that Craig unveils alone on an acoustic guitar during the encore, is so new that it is still both untitled and unfinished) but the songs that are familiar from the album have mutated into wild new flavours. Craig never sings the songs the same way twice any more. Instead, he fucks with effects and his delivery, stretching sounds and turning the aggressive into the gentle and the gentle into the murderous. There's improvisation in his playing too, but it's no jazz odyssey. It's just, as Craig would say, really far-out.

Later, at around 5am, when the first shards of daylight have pierced the windows of the pub around the corner from the venue, the band and their clique start to fracture in different directions. Hamish and his moustache disappear in the company of a glamorous new friend. Craig finally says goodbye to old friends he hadn't seen for years - including one girl who keeps trying, and failing, to hold his hand and lead him out of the pub - and slips away into the dawn. And Patrick and Ryan's friends take their ecstatic party back to Patrick's hotel suite in leafy Surry Hills for a little while longer.

"I finally kicked them out at midday," Patrick croaks over a beer in the pub opposite the next evening. "I got a couple of hours' sleep. That's all you really need sometimes."

He pushes the hair from out of his eyes, the only manoeuvre he ever makes at the end of Vines gigs. It always ends like this, on 'Fuck The World': Craig flies through the drumkit and knocks over the amps; Hamish kicks over the cymbals and tosses his sticks into the crowd; Patrick straightens his centre parting and walks offstage. (Ryan, meanwhile, is already backstage cracking a bottle open and rifling through the venue's first aid kit for pharmaceuticals). As Patrick repeats his hair move now, he can suddenly be seen in a new light. He really looks a lot like James Walsh from Starsailor.

"Yeah? Isn't he the guy who got in a slanging match with Oasis? That's pretty funny. Not too many British bands do that with Oasis. If they were Aussie everyone would here. Maybe one day we could get into something with them, call them, I dunno, pussies or something if things get a bit tough for us press-wise."

CONTINUES PAGE 71

Craig's early Thom Yorke impression has come on a treat

Mall hysterical society: The Vines make unlikely shopping/TV appearance

It's hard to imagine Craig, the man-child who fell to Earth from god knows where, ever being quite that calculating, however. He welcomes us into his hotel suite to the strains of Suede on loop on the stereo, the TV on but muted and a big bag of grass open on the table. He's serenely calm this evening, a million miles from yesterday's nuttiness.

"I was drinking last night," he confirms. "I can't remember when I last did that. Really I just drink Coke and Red Bull. I never take hard drugs. But I was in a really good mood last night. It's so good to be back in Sydney. The city looks really cool."

Last night, Hamish had been adamant that the band were moving back here from their base in LA, that all his stuff was in transit between the two cities. He made out that it was an absolute imperative for the band's future wellbeing. Craig isn't quite so sure.

"I've been thinking about it. I would like to. I think I will live in Australia one day and I want to.

delicate sound. Because I do the songwriting it can't help but be a reflection of my personality. People say I'm mad and suicidal. I'm not. If anyone else asks me if I'm suicidal I think I'll kill myself."

You're pretty chaotic. "I feel really strange. I can be shouting out stuff and I don't even know what I'm saying. I'm like, 'What... why am I doing this, what is going on?' So I'll say, 'Sorry, I feel really bad, I feel really embarrassed, what was I going on about?' A week ago we were at a soundcheck and I had a Red Bull and I really got crazy. I was jumping off these cars in the car park. I just need to have a smoke and chill out and not drink Red Bull. But I kinda just think, yeah, like everyone I have my ups and downs but mine are really extreme. I don't want to be negative, I don't want to piss anybody off.

"If I'm really excited or frustrated ('frostrated')... I feel kinda calm today. I don't know how I'll be tomorrow. God, man, it's just I think about life a lot. Not the

an enormous thunderclap. He ducks down.

"...woah! Scary..."

Don't you get lonely just listening to Suede and Muse on a loop on your own all the time, thinking of nothing but music?

"Sometimes. It sounds pretty pathetic, like music is my friend. But it's a great thing. It speaks to you on so many levels. The excitement and mystique to what we're doing is so great. It's good for me to be on my own anyway because if I'm around people too much I will just bug ('bog") them. The people I'm with understand what I'm saying there."

Would you like to share this with someone though, like a girlfriend?

"Maybe I guess, maybe. We're moving around so it's really hard to have a girlfriend. If I wasn't doing this then I'd be able to have a girlfriend but I wouldn't be playing in a band so there goes a lot of the girls who want to be my girlfriend. Also, I think I'd be put in a mental institute if I wasn't doing something like music.

"When I used to be just Craig's friend, whenever he got too loopy I could leave. Now we're on the road I can't. I mean, I have hit him in the past" Patrick

But it's not out of the question that... I may go... it may happen... I'm kinda thinking... Well, I guess I like staying in hotels. That's the problem. It doesn't matter where the hotel is. It's hard to think I want to go look for a place since we only end up going away really quick."

This should soon make for an interesting band debate. We ask Craig what his colleagues are like, how he relates to them. As he explains how he feels about them individually, he also reveals his feelings on his violent moodswings. It's clearly been playing on his mind.

"Patrick, bass player, he's kinda quiet sometimes," he begins, trying to avert his eyes from the pictures of soldiers fighting on the news by drawing a face on his pad. "I think he's really smart. He's great musically. He likes reading a lot more than me, I know that. I listen to a lot more music than he does.

"Ryan is really cool. He loves animals. He's really easy-going. I went to school with him and it's great he's in the band.

"Hamish is a great drummer. He's very positive. He helps me out with little things. I can have a lot of good song ideas and Hamish will help me get back to the hotel to work on them, or go down to the store and get some food for me. We all go through moods where we're quiet but Hamish helps out with that because he likes to talk. Ryan is like Patrick, he's a little shy, and I can be like that but I can also be like Hamish. I can be more shy than Patrick or Ryan, and I can be a lot more energetic than Hamish sometimes."

He stops and fiddles with his lighter.

"I think I have some situation in my head. It's all connected to the music that we do, how we can go from thunderous noise to this

meaning of it but what it means to me or what it means to other people, or what music means."

Suddenly the fog clears from his mind.

"But the main thing is I don't feel bad. I'm not making excuses because I'm an artist, but unless I hurt or offend someone, it's OK. It's just because there's a lot going on and my brain goes a little haywire. There isn't room for anything other than music in there."

When you're thinking about what life means, what conclusions do you come up with?

"I get really excited. I think of all the possibilities. I just want things to be good for everyone. I try and shut bad things out. If I see things on television about a war, I don't really want to see that. I just want to listen to the new Suede album. I don't want to focus on war even though it's really bad. I like to do different things away from listening to music too, like..."

His voice trails off for a minute or two as he grapples with the concept.

"...like, nothing springs to mind at the moment. Sometimes I think everything is really great and sometimes I think, 'Shit, this is crap'. I think I'm bi-polar or something. I don't know if I think too much or I don't think at all. It's a fine line between the two. Don't go there, man, that's my advice. It'll drive you mad you if you think about it. I don't really understand anything. I just want to have a good time. But of course, yes, there's a balance between this band and the world. It's important that we..."

He's suddenly interrupted by

I don't want to meet a girlfriend in there. Not really."

September 31, The Metro Club, Sydney, 1.30am

We came to see the wizard in Oz because of all the wonderful things he does, and his wizardry didn't disappoint on any level. Tonight, after another bewitching, rapturously received performance from a band rebuilding basic rock'n'roll into something other-worldly and significant, we discover where the trail started for Craig Nicholls. It doesn't explain what random force musically electrified this slight, intense, possessed young man – but it's nonetheless illuminating.

As we leave the aftershow clutching a bag of CDs of local bands, a female Aussie voice as thick and strident as Madge Bishop of Ramsey Street calls after us.

"Hey! I hope those are Vines CDs in there, mister," she shouts.

NME turns round to be confronted by a gaggle of ten ruddy-faced, slightly pissed, middle-aged women in Vines T-shirts and badges. You're not by any chance....

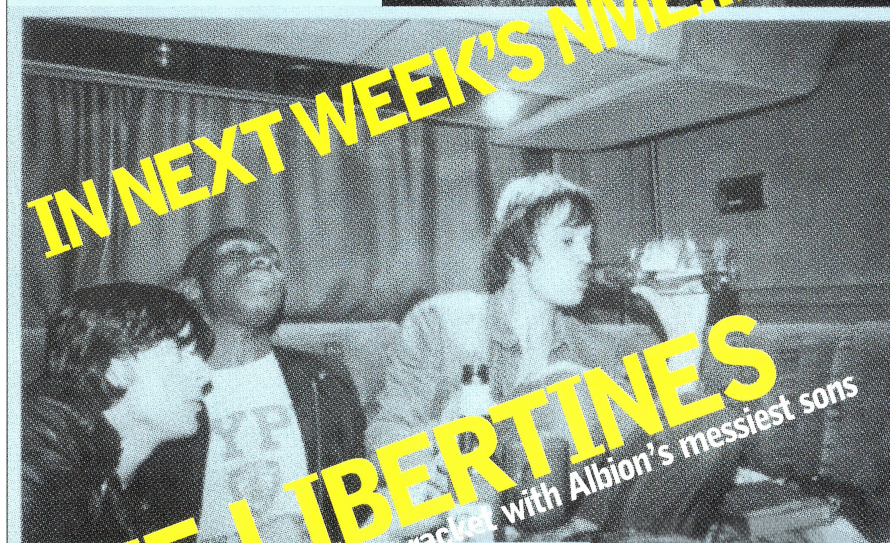
"This," laughs the amply-proportioned blonde puffing furiously on a cigarette at the group's centre, "is Ryan's mum. This is Craig's auntie. And I'm Craig's mum. Did you enjoy the show, mate?"

Of course. You must be very proud of him.

Noreen Nicholls takes a deep drag on her fag and blushes.

"Ah, yeah. Isn't he just one in a million?"

Isn't he just.



GRAHAM COXON
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